

Gretchen DeVries

Seed-Planter/Plantador de Semillas

Gretchen DeVries, Seed-Planter¹
Living, Breathing, Caring Hospitality Center
Speaker of the Language of the Heart
Adventurer in the Christian Faith
Believer in Equality and Justice
Extender of the Family
Servant Leader
Awakener
Giver
With
Spirit Glue
Welcoming Hugs
That We May All Live Together
In Peace



1. Getting to Know Gretchen/Aprendiendo a conocer a Gretchen

Name/Nombre:	Gretchen Lucille DeVries
Career/Carrera:	UCC Missionary, Asian Rural Institute, Japan/UCC Misionaria, Asian Rural Instituto, Japón
A.B. Recipient:	1985
Birthday/Cumpleaños:	December 18, 1923, to Frederick H. DeVries and Emma Marie Rosa(Bierstedt) DeVries/ Diciembre 18, 1923
Died/Fecha que Murió:	February 24, 2005 / Febrero 24, 2005
Place of Birth/Ciudad de Nacimiento:	Cortland, Nebraska (Pop.: 300)
Color of Hair/Color de Pelo:	Brown/Café

¹ The writer is indebted to Anne DeVries who made available email communications from colleagues and friends.

Color of Eyes/Color de Ojos: Blue /Azul

Brothers or Sisters/Hermanos o Hermanas:

1 sister, 6 brothers/1 Hermana, 6
Hermanos

Birth Order/Orden De Nacimiento en la Familia:

Fifth born/Quinta

Favorite School Subject/Clase Favorita:

Public Speaking/Hablando
Públicamente

Hobbies/Pasa Tiempo:

Playing the Guitar/Tocando la
Guitarra; Friends from
Church/Amigas de Iglesia

My friends and I liked/A mis amigas y a mi nos gustaba

Attend PF retreats at Doane
College/Ir a retiros en el Colegio
de Doane

2. What is ARI?

You could come, too. Volunteers at the Asian Rural Institute, Gretchen DeVries' place, have arrived at Nishinasuno Station since 1973. In August, ARI has a 10-day work camp for 15 high school students, max. They work at farms with local high school students.²

Okay, here is how you get to Gretchen's place. First, come to Tokyo. Ride the Japanese Railway. If you want to get somewhere fast, take the *Shinkansen*. Welcome that after your 12-hour flight from LA. The "bullet train" lazes along at 164 mph. Suitcase ready? Ears listening? Get off Super Express at Nasu-Shiobara Station. Train stops only a few seconds. Take the Local to Nishinasuno Station. The Asian Rural Institute is ten minutes by taxi.

More than a thousand adults, already grassroots leaders in their rural communities, have graduated from the training center. They are from over 51 developing nations. For nine months, they learn by doing how best to use local resources and abilities for the common good. The only requirement is to have an open mind for new experiences and new challenges.

² <http://www.ari.edu>

As servant leaders, they learn

- Leadership skills
- How to raise food in sound sustainable ways that help to reduce dependence on outside resources
- Methods for producing food self-sufficiency for the long-haul
- How to protect land and resources for many more generations.

They serve in a way that empowers others to grow and change. New experience brings personal and spiritual growth, as well as understanding of the interdependence of all life. The center calls them to build an environmentally healthy, just, and peaceful world.

Others come for shorter sessions. Working visitors stay for up to 90 days, volunteers longer. All want to practice working and living together with others from many different countries.

3. Gretchen's Place

"Whoever has been to ARI shares the sense of extended family regardless of religion, race, language, and other differences that often divide people," said Kaori Takami Natsume. The daughter of ARI founder, the Reverend Toshihiro "Tom" Takami³, shares her first memory of Gretchen:

To me, DeVries-sensei was my aunt. I've known her for my entire life. When I was about four, I had chicken pox and a high fever. I tried to reach the freezer to get something cold but was too short.

About to cry frustration, I sensed someone watching me. I turned and looked through the window. DeVries-sensei was standing on the second floor of the main building waving at me. I felt really good then.

That one memory, Kaori said, became for her a core element of understanding community life. "The sense of living in the huge ARI family where someone was always thinking about me and watching over me made me feel warm and secure."

³ Material from Toshihiro "Tom" Takami consists of emails, a phone interview throughout September, 2005, and his eulogy, "For the Memorial Service of Gretchen."

4. Finding Voice

JAPAN, SPRING 1972: ENTER THE REVEREND GRETCHEN DEVRIES, AGE 48.

Let's back up. First came disappointment. "Gretchen had intended to go to India, her first love in Asia," Tom Takami said. "She took all the preliminary training for India. Their doors were closed then to her and all other 'missionaries' as newly independent nations shook away colonialism."

Needless to say, my decision to become a missionary has not been without its doubts and fears, but God has been persistent, daily broadening my vision of what it means to serve Christ and strengthening my faith for that service.⁴

At missionary orientation classes at Stony, NY, she found answers to her questions:

- *How can a Christian serve Christ in a country where Christianity is a minority religion?*
- *What is the connecting point?*
- *Would I have faith that God "can work through all of creation, including other cultures and other religion?"*

It is in the name of the common humanity of the children of God that I go to help develop awareness for their God-given potential for creating the future, rather than 'being victimized by its social, political and economic forces.

I am an instrument of God who helps relate the Gospel message of God's pardon and power to the larger human community. It is really no different from the mission we all have no matter where we are.

5. Life Training

⁴ All quotations of Gretchen DeVries are from "A Statement of Christian Experience and Belief," November 6, 1966. On file with Lincoln (Nebraska UCC) Association Registrar.

Had Gretchen known she would become a missionary as early as high school days? One of twelve in her class, she was a good student. She accepted everyone. Whatever she set her mind to, she did.

After "one of those annual Pilgrim Fellowship conferences at Doane," her younger sister said, "every night, there Gretchen was kneeling down by her bed saying prayers. The conference youth leader, Miss Hanford, had a strong influence."

Later the sisters, who roomed together in the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, returned to Cortland to attend church and youth group. At one gathering, Gretchen met Doane College student, Tom Takami. By then, she was PF youth advisor and camp registrar.

During the Depression Years of the 1930s, Christmas Eve candy bags from church plus an orange were the only sweets the eight DeVries children would have. On Sundays they ate chicken. They also ate many beans and potatoes.

As soon as their brothers could hold a hammer, they worked with their dad. He was an excellent builder, Gretchen wrote, but bills sent were difficult to collect.

The two girls spent considerable time gardening, peeling potatoes, washing dishes, and making beds, Winifred said. "Gretchen knew how to work hard long before she became a missionary."

"She wanted a guitar in high school. That would have been difficult for my parents," Winifred said. "She did manage to get that guitar."

There were many opportunities to learn about sharing, thrift, cooperation, consideration for others, habits of work. I was fortunate to be born into a large family that was rich in love.

6. The Plan Starts to Form

My growth during these years was beyond measure.

God's plan for Gretchen began to emerge. After graduating, she held temporary office jobs while attending Business College. Then she worked at Olson Construction Company, their first woman employee. During her fourteen years there, she also earned a Bachelor of Arts in business administration and Masters in social work.

At a YWCA/YMCA College Summer Service project during 1954 and 1955, she worked aboard St. John's Floating Hospital, a New York City social agency. She began to consider a career in social work.

Part of my graduate study was financed through a Girl Scout scholarship and upon graduation I served four years as a District Director for the Susquehanna Council of Girl Scouts in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

The organizational skills she gained from 1958 to 1962 would be valuable at the Asian Rural Institute. Her office experience and her refined use of the language did not hurt, either.

While in Pennsylvania, I became increasingly aware of the world-wide impact that the church should be having in molding the future of the world.

Dr. and Mrs. Seybold, two missionaries, and William Wimer, who served on the UCC Board of World Ministries, gave her the requirements for becoming a missionary.

7. Seed-Planter

My call to the Christian ministry was a gradual unfolding and awakening. My Christian faith is not so much a belief in a principle or idea as a relationship with a living God who is concerned about us. The validity of my faith is tested through my relationship to the world in which I live. As partners with God in history we are called to serve humanity" whether Christian or non-Christian.

From 1962-1966, she attended the Pacific School of Religion, earning a Bachelor of Divinity degree.

At almost forty, I was reminded that as an individual one must continually plant the seeds that later come to fruition through the work of the Holy Spirit.

How true this would be at ARI.

While at seminary, she served as Associate Pastor at Fruitvale UCC in Oakland. On November 6, 1966, she was ordained in Cortland as a UCC minister."

ARI graduates tell that her lifework helped them learn to help themselves. Many friends emailed her at Monarch Hospice as she was dying. Sample several heart notes:

"With Gretchen's service with Takami Sensei, ARI became an institution which gives hope to rural people all over the world." - Koa Tasaka, ARI Director:

"So responsive to everybody." - Indonesian Graduate

"Reverend, you always carried a smile on your face. I never experienced you ever getting angry with anyone or anything." – Graduate from India

"Loving and caring and with a heart for the Lord and lost people." - A 1972-1973 participant from Kathmandu, Nepal

"You guided us in many ways that we may remain as true leaders in the community." - Sri Lankan Graduates

"A good and loving mother to us. Our training is being utilized in the rebuilding of our war ravaged country." - David Foday, Liberia, West Africa

8. The Tokyo Adventure

"It was a disaster," said Tom Takami. "After many twists and turns, she eventually came to Japan in 1967." Her orientation in Tokyo included language study at the Naganuma Nihongo School.

"Japanese is complicated," the ARI founder continued. "She just could not get a handle on it. Still, she persisted."

All was not lost, however. The late 1960s spawned many lumber companies around Tokyo. Young working people were keen to practice speaking English. Gretchen taught a weekly English conversation class. A letter signed by nine class members shares stories:

- "We were all young and eager to listen to authentic American English." As distinguishing between 'V' and 'B' sounds is difficult, pupils called Gretchen "Debris-sensei. She kept smiling."

- Once during a ski excursion, they were stuck in a bus for twelve hours because of a traffic jam. "DeVries-sensei had to fold her long limbs and long stature into multiple layers. She crammed herself into a space that was small even for Japanese. Moreover, she had to wait for another day to get a pair of ski boots that fit."
- "She taught us not only English but also the big love of God. Her warm smile, welcoming hugs and gentle ways will stay in our hearts."

A lasting Tokyo friendship also formed between Gretchen and Mary St. John. The two English teachers hit it off. Mary took a deep interest in the Asian Rural Institute. Mary visited Gretchen often at ARI.

Decades after their first greeting at Doane College, Gretchen met Tom Takami again. To spring 1972 came the birth of a solution to the language dilemma, Takami continued. "Alden Matthews, who was helping missionary assignments, suggested she visit me. I was at the Rural Evangelical Seminary at Tsurukawa on the outskirts of Tokyo. Alden told her, "You can work there only in the English language."

Years later, colleagues still enjoyed joshing their good-natured friend about her difficulty with the language. Former volunteer, Sarah McAliley Oba wrote, "My endearing memory is your humorous and humble testimony of how God led you to ARI. When you realized that life on the campus was conducted mostly in English, you felt a strong calling to ARI!"

When it was suggested years later that the English-speaking staff might improve its Japanese language skills, Gretchen reportedly offered this comeback, "I guess I'm out of here!"

9. Mission ARI

"God's mysterious hands were moving about us in the making of ARI," said Tom Takami. In 1972, Gretchen DeVries had arrived at the seminary. The next year, Tom Takami helped lay the foundations of the Asian Rural Institute. Founding a learning center for social justice was a risky investment. Quietly, Gretchen came along.

As initial director, Takami traveled much in the institute's formative years. Gretchen's information letters, containing "very detailed reports about ARI," greeted his arrival at destinations. Meanwhile,



she coordinated communications with sponsors, graduates, and potential students.

She also shared in the valuable and valued farm work. Her relatives mark her tenacity in wading through muddy rice paddies even in her aging years.

The investment worked. Gretchen's United Church Board for World Missions, the oldest mission board in America, invited all other mission boards in North America to nurture and support the institute in its goal to train rural men and women worldwide.

"We were good partners in mission to the world," Tom Takami said. "God sent us our missionary when we needed her and made maximum use of her skills and capacities.

"I often felt Gretchen might be the only person among ARI staff to understand me deeply. I also knew the farm community of Cortland where I visited while at Doane College. My higher education was not done in Japan but in USA. Perhaps because of this, I was led to establish the Asian Rural Institute. To this date this international learning center is, to my knowledge, the only institute of its kind. Gretchen understood all of this."

10. A Living, Breathing, Caring Hospitality Center

Whether at ARI or traveling widely over rural Asia or Africa, Gretchen was a welcoming person. More heart notes:

- Pam Hasegawa, friend and volunteer. Every graduate they met, she said, would react in the same way "with love and joy written all over their faces, reflected back to them from yours. You had loved them as they arrived in a new, strange place. You are a living, breathing, caring hospitality center. Over the years you must have listened to thousands of heart stories with your caring ear and compassionate spirit.
- "Dear Rev. DeVries, you were a good example of a woman pastor. You made me stronger to face the challenge from a violent world where most children and women become victims." Debora Sinaga

It is not so much what someone does as what that person awakens in us to do that counts. Gretchen was an awakener of the highest order.

- Anbaham wrote from Anbu Manai Boys' Home in Sacharnet, India. "Dear and beloved Devries-sensei, two decades ago we came out as graduates to serve and uplift the needy and deserving grass root people. We have given new life for thousands of Orphan and Destitute children, old age people and adopted remote villages, and developing the residents in all aspects through our Institution Saint Boniface.

"We used to see Devries-sensei working in the ARI administration block from early sun rise to the very cool snowy late night and wondered whether you had any time for sleep. Your administration efficiency and hard work influenced and inspired us in our present activities."

- From Debora, a theology student: "Dear Rev. DeVries, My Teacher, My Mum, My beloved Sister, My faithful Friend, if all women pastors all over the world are as dedicated and committed to God's mission, maybe our world will fill with peace, no war, and no fights.

"Your life has been a good example to us and inspired our life and spiritual journey. I plan to study for my Doctorate of Ministry in Feminist Theology at San Francisco Theological Seminary. "

11. Barbara on Gretchen and ARI⁵

"Missionaries recognize that ARI is a little island of hope," said Barbara Mueller, ARI missionary. "If people can learn to live together there, the world can maybe, just maybe, learn to survive. Gretchen realized that it was not she alone. She wanted to give something back, she merely passed it on.

"She had studied all those years with one thing in mind," Barbara said. "Being a missionary was her whole life. A missionary is aware of wanting to reach out to other people and be of assistance. It is the calling to be a part of something bigger than just me.

"I thought she did everything perfectly. I took all my cues from her about interacting with people overseas. I felt at first that I could not keep up. One day, I found a file labeled, '1987 Neglected Correspondence.' It was 1990. At once, I felt better.

At Gretchen's invitation, Barbara shared her house for nine years. They became good friends, a house team. Barbara did not enjoy

⁵ Author phone interview with Barbara Mueller in early September, 2005.

cleaning but liked cooking. Gretchen did not mind cleaning but detested cooking. She was frugal for herself but contributed heavily to causes.

When they were wakeful in the night, Barbara urged, "'Gretchen, you are 65. Go to sleep.' Most often she left her bed to type a couple hours then returned for another hour of sleep. She said she had slowed down enough that she could use a little extra time. As it was, she worked eighteen hours a day."

At ARI for more than thirty-two years, Gretchen received income from her mission board for fourteen years. Then she worked at the center for more than fifteen years as a volunteer using pension income.

She was Associate Director from 1985-1990, becoming Director in 1990 at age 66. When it was time for Tom Takami to retire as Director, he took Gretchen aside, Barbara reported. "Gretchen, take it. Take it." Gretchen could not turn down the plea of her friend. She still had work to do. She stayed on as Director for three years.

After that, she alternated six month periods between ARI and Cortland, Nebraska, until 2001. During breaks in the United States, she taught and preached country-wide, baptized nieces and nephews, and officiated at their weddings later.

It was one thing for students to practice new techniques when surrounded by supportive people. It was quite another to return home alone and attempt to bring significant changes.

Gretchen made numerous homeland visits that bolstered the courage of graduates and trips. She went into Europe, to Alaska and across the USA where she found "sending institutions," individual contributors and the establishment of foundations. ARI had been established as a non-governmental training center. Therefore, each volunteer from a developing nation must have a sending institution to pay for tuition and living costs.

12. The Next Journey

When Gretchen and Tande-Boy, her Himalayan cat, returned to Cortland to stay, she again became active in her home church. She served as church treasurer, helped write the monthly church letter, and promoted the elevator that now welcomes everyone to all three building levels.

As she prepared for her next journey, Eimert and Eve Herwijnen wrote: "Dear Gretchen, we had the feeling that you were always well prepared for all you intended to do. Even the many things you did not intend to do but just came on your road, you could prepare yourself for - as it seemed to us - in a split second by straightening your back and making contact with your God."

"As we prepared to return to the Netherlands after a reunion at the center, you "poured a blessing over us. It was not just words but a real blessing, a living blessing that would go with us for life. May this be your blessing now, "That we may all live together."



13. What About You?

A. Gretchen DeVries followed as her spiritual guide, Micah 6:8.

What favorite story, biblical character, or verse might be speaking to you about your life direction?

B. Deciding to become a missionary was not "without its doubts and fears, but God has been persistent. . . ." Listening for God's call in new ways and places is both risky and joyful. Still, Gretchen moved forward.

Tell about a time you hoped to do something but were not sure if you could do it or if it were really for you.

C. Read Jeremiah 29:11. As a youth, Gretchen gave herself time with God in prayer. Throughout her life, she let herself be open to hear what God had in mind. She let questions come then puzzled through them to gain greater understanding of how and why her life was unfolding in this way.

What characteristics or life goals would make someone a good servant leader, a missionary?

What helped Gretchen prepare for her lifework at ARI?

What events, family circumstances, or other threads of life experience have added notes to the song of your emerging voice? How are these God-connecting?

How do you see the plan for your life beginning to unfold?

One to ten, how do you rank your trust of God?

D. Gretchen's emotional and spiritual maturity revealed itself through an ARI participant's comment. She had found where, how, and to whom she could reveal angry feelings. Everyone, church people included, feels anger. Life in the real world is tense.

What word(s) stands out to you in Ephesians 4:26? What are some safe ways you have found to express your feelings?

E. Not everything went according to plan, but Gretchen stayed flexible.

Tell about a disappointment or failure that discouraged your plans and what sense it may mean to you now.

14. Church Family Project

Find out if anyone in your church has served as a missionary. Interview that person or someone who knows about her or him. Share what you learn at a church gathering, in your church newsletter, or on your church website.

15. Still Curious?

The Asian Rural Institute. Steven Cutting at info@ARI-edu.org or <http://www.ARI-edu.org>.

The Calendar of Prayer. On ucc.org, link Worship then Calendar of Prayer. Specific stories, arranged by date, show the breadth and depth of mission outreach. Also in print. Ask your pastor.

The Global Ministries Website: "Global Ministries News" at <http://www.globalministries.org/whatsnew.htm>.

Mission Moments. [Ucc.org](http://ucc.org), link Worship, link Mission Moments. Stories that connect us with wider mission of our church.

United Church of Christ, Wider Church Ministries (formerly UCBWM). Contact the Reverend Cally Rogers-Witte, Executive Minister at wittec@ucc.org. Toll free, 866-822-8224.

Volunteer Opportunities. [Ucc.org](http://ucc.org), link Volunteer Opportunities.

Dallas (Dee) A. Brauning. *Antoinette Brown Women:
Finding Voice*, <http://ucc.org/women/finding.htm>.

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